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In Search of National Character

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Abstract

The paper deals with the concept of national character which has become especially popular nowadays, at the time of globalization, because of a prospect (or threat) felt by all nations of the possible coming loss of national identities under the pressure of global processes. The author examines various probable sources of information on the concept of national character marking their positive and negative features. The sources under investigation are: international jokes, classical literature, folklore and – surprise, surprise! – national language and culture.

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1. Introduction

Language and man are inseparable. Language does not exist outside man and man as *Homo sapiens* does not exist outside language. So, man cannot be studied outside language and vice versa. Language reflects the world around us - through man and for man, language likewise reflects the culture created by man, preserves it for posterity and hands it down from generation to generation. Language is a cognitive tool through which man perceives the universe and culture. And, finally, language is a cultural tool: it moulds people, determines their behaviour, way of life, outlook, mentality, ideology and national character. The term and concept of national character are to be discussed in greater detail because the paper is focused on them.

Language reflects the world and culture and moulds the native speakers of this language as well as their national character. All these well-known truths look obvious. However, the mission of scholars is to doubt the

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obvious, investigate and analyze it. In humanities it is even more so than in sciences for obvious reasons: the subject of scientists' investigation is the world outside man, it is more definite and more "objective" in the sense that it exists irrespective of humans.

The national character is not an object of the outside world, it exists only in the human mind. No wonder that this concept arouses some doubts and arguments about its existence.

Indeed, what is meant by national character? Is there such a thing? How correct is it to generalise and extrapolate typical features onto a whole nation when it is a known fact that all people are different? There is an English saying that goes: "It takes all sorts to make a world". Can one then say: "It takes one sort to make a nation?" Or does national character imply a set of stereotyped qualities attributed to one nation by another – often not entirely friendly - nation? Where should one look for the concept of national character? This paper is an attempt to answer these questions.

2. Methodology

The questions concerning the term and the concept of national character have been in the focus of scholarly attention beginning from the second half of the 20th century. Most of the researchers of the concept agree that, as has been mentioned above, the personality of a native speaker is moulded by his mother tongue. Accordingly, a national language both reflects and shapes national character. In other words, if language shapes the personality of the individual native speaker, then it follows that it must play an equally constructive role in the formation of national character. At the same time it is clear that it is impossible to separate the passive, "reflective" and active, formative functions of the language, that this is no more than a euristic technique, a convention used in research. Fully aware of its conventional nature, we will continue to make use of this technique, however, to show, with examples taken from the English and Russian, how language moulds the personality through a great variety of means at its disposal of which national culture is, undoubtedly, the main one. As a rule, people are unaware of the active role language plays in moulding their character, determining their behaviour, attitude to life, people, etc.

A lot has been written by psychologists, culturologists, sociologists and philologists on the correlation between national culture and personality. In their book, "Language and Culture", E.M. Vereshchagin and V.G. Kostomarov, comment as follows in this connection: "A man is not born a Russian, German or Japanese etc., but becomes one as a result of living in the relevant national community of people. In its upbringing, a child is exposed to the impact of the national culture to which, the people surrounding it, belong" (Vereshchagin, Kostomarov, 1990, p. 25).

The controversial and complex nature of the concept of national character indicates a certain terminological confusion – a problem common to all humanities. Instead of **national character**, Nikolai Erofeev uses the term **ethnic idea** which he defines as "a verbal portrait or image of a different nation" (Erofeev, 1982, p.7) and S. Arutyunyan – the term **psychological make-up of a nation** which he defines as "a unique sum total of different manifestations of a people's spiritual life" (Arutyunyan, 1966, p. 23). However, **national character** remains the most common term.

Many believe that national character is not a combination of specific traits characteristic of a given nation, but rather a unique set of universal human traits.

At the plenary session at the opening of "The Week of the Russian Language in France", in March 1998, V. Kostomarov spoke to that effect: "National culture is not a combination of unique features, characteristic of a particular people, it is a distinct set of universal features and ideas". And Yu. Bromley likewise notes that one can talk "only of the relative nature of national character traits, of nuances in their manifestation." (Bromley, 1975, p. 94)

Thus, we get an extremely contradictory picture. Is there such a thing, then, as national character? If there is, what evidence of its existence can be considered objective and scientific?

Where should we search for it?

What can be regarded as a source of objective information on national character?

Let us try and identify these sources.

3. Findings and analysis

The material analyzed in the paper presents the results of a search for potential sources of information on national character.

What can be regarded as this kind of source?

The first thing that comes to mind when discussing the national character of a particular people is a set of stereotypes associated with the nation in question.

A **stereotype** is defined as “a schematic, standardised image or impression of a social phenomenon or thing, usually emotionally coloured and fixed. It expresses a person’s habitual attitude to something formed under the impact of social conditions and on the basis of previous experience...” (Onikov, 1987, p. 447)

English dictionaries give a similar definition of the word “stereotype” – “fixed mental impression” (Concise Oxford English Dictionary); “a fixed pattern which is believed to represent a type of person or event” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English).

The words *stereotype*, *stereotyped* have negative connotations both in English and Russian because they often are defined by the word cliché which in its turn means *hackneyed, devoid of expressiveness and originality*. This is not entirely fair with reference to the word *stereotype* in general and particularly unfair when it is used in the context of cultural communication. Though schematic and generalised, national and cultural stereotypes prepare one for an encounter with an alien culture, cushion the blow, mitigate culture shock. “Stereotypes enable a man to build up an impression of the world as a whole, to overcome the limitations of his narrow social, geographical and political environment.” (Pavlovskaya, 1998, p. 17).

1. The most popular source of national stereotypes are the so-called “international” jokes built up round a clichéd theme: people of different nationalities, finding themselves in a similar situation respond to it in different ways, according to the national character traits ascribed to them in the country where the joke originated.

Thus, in Russian “international” jokes the English are portrayed as extremely punctual, taciturn, pragmatic, reserved, fond of cigars, whisky, horse racing, etc.

The Germans - as practical, disciplined, organised, and as sticklers for order to the point of absurdity.

The French – as frivolous playboys, epicureans, thinking only of women, wine and gastronomic pleasures.

The Americans – as rich, generous, self-assured, pragmatic, known for good expensive cars.

The Russians – as reckless, happy-go-lucky, not fussy, hard-drinking, pugnacious, open, uncouth, fond of vodka and brawls.

In Russian “international” jokes all these nationalities live up to their stereotypes.

Take, for example, a very simple joke about how people of different nationalities behave when they see a fly in a glass of beer.

The German (practical) gets rid of the fly and drinks the beer.

The Frenchman (sentimental) fishes out the fly, blows on it, spreads out its wings and does not drink the beer.

The Russian (not a bit fussy and fond of the bottle) drinks the beer along with the fly.

The American (sure of his rights) summons the waiter, makes a scene and demands another mug of beer and a financial compensation for some moral detriment.

West European stereotypes are well illustrated in the following jokes:

Paradise is where the cooks are French, mechanics – German, policemen – British, lovers - Italian and it is all organised by the Swiss.

Hell is where the cooks are British, policemen – German, lovers – the Swiss, mechanics – French and it is all organised by Italians.

2. Another source is national classical literature. The term *classical* is crucial in this context because classical literature has withstood the test of time. It follows, therefore, that such works appeal to the feelings and mind of a given people, given culture.

When the heroes of national literatures are compared to their stereotype counterparts in international jokes, the contrast is striking.

Indeed the dramatic heroes of the classical masterpieces by Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Mérimée, de Maupassant and Zola, who are portrayed as being engaged in tackling complex human problems, are poles apart from the frivolous Frenchmen of the jokes whose only concern is wine and women.

While the stuffy and reserved to the point of absurdity Englishmen of the jokes created a literature full of sparkling humour, irony and sarcasm. The majority of great humorists are English: Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Charles Dickens, Makepeace Thackeray, and, among others, Shakespeare who wrote 22 comedies as against 5 tragedies. No other culture puts such value on humour!

And the drilled, self-disciplined Germans from international anecdotes gave the world the very lyrical and profound poetry by Goethe and Heine.

And finally Russians, the hooligans and drunks of anecdotal fame, made a most valuable contribution to world literature: the works by Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Gorky, Sholokhov and so many others. With their philosophical quest and moral sufferings, the heroes of these works represent the intelligentsia amidst the characters of world classical literature (It is not for nothing that the word *intelligentsia* is of Russian origin).

So where should we look for the Russian national character type: in jokes or in classical literature? And who is a typical Russian – the man with a bucket of vodka in the freezer or Pierre Bezukhov?

It is a known fact that before invading Russia in the Second World War the Nazis mounted a campaign to gather information on Russia and the Russians. And one of the main sources on which they drew was Russian classical literature. It was literature that provided the Nazi leaders with their view of the Russian national character. Russia, they thought, was “a giant on legs of clay” – push it and it would disintegrate – it is a country populated with indecisive, introspective and spineless members of intelligentsia such as Bezukhov, Nekhlyudov, Myshkin, Raskolnikov, Uncle Vanya, Ivanov etc.

Ivan Solonevich writes in bitter vein to this effect: “It was Russian literature that provided the basic background for all foreign information on Russia: there are your Oblomovs, Manilovs, superfluous people, poor people, idiots and tramps” (Solonevich, 1991, p.166).

Critical of Russian classical literature being used as a reference source, Solonevich calls it “a distorting mirror of the people’s soul” (Solonevich, 1991, p.164).

Without engaging in polemic, I would like to try and ‘rehabilitate’ Russian literature. O.K., so it misled the Nazis. True, the Brest Fortress was defended by people of a different calibre to the Manilovs and Bezukhovs of this world. But who knows how these two characters might have behaved had they found themselves in the fortress. They too, perhaps, might have demonstrated that same kernel of “iron in the Russian national character” which, according to Solonevich, Russian literature failed to reflect.

While not following Solonevich in his indignant rejection of all literature, I believe that it is not so much a distorting, as an incomplete, mirror. It cannot be a complete mirror – “for no one can cover the uncoverable” as the Russian writer, Alexei Tolstoy – pseudonym Kozma Prutkov – said. It is incomplete and subjective. **It is a subjective rather than a distorting mirror**, for each work of literature has a specific author with his/her own subjective, i.e., personal to himself/herself, vision of the world, formed to a large extent by his/her own individual life, creative imagination, and talent.

Thus, with certain reservations, literature too serves as a source of information on national character.

3. Finally, we come to the third source where one can and should seek for the “soul of the people” – folklore, oral folk art. In this sense folklore has a great advantage over literature for works of folk art are anonymous, they are created not by an individual, but by an entire people, this is collective creativity.

What light does folklore throw on national character? First and foremost, it reveals a certain uniformity because at the center of the epic works of oral folk art stands a real Hero: a warrior mighty, handsome, in modern terminology – a superman, who defends his people from all evil: dragons, monsters, natural calamities, hostile forces. In addition to his supernatural powers and abilities, he often possesses a magic horse, a magic sword or other magical objects. Like Robin Hood, he is the most skillful of archers and, like Ilya Muromets, he possesses unheard of strength. Such a hero is the embodiment of the people’s eternal dream of a strong and just protector who will punish wrongdoers. Russian folklore has paid tribute to such heroes in *bylinas* (heroic, epic songs) in which Russian warriors defend their land with the same zeal and success as do the heroes of the “Kalevala” and David Sasunsky and the Knight in the Tiger’s Skin.

However, the chief personage of Russian folktales is unique and not a bit like the hero-superman we have just been described. Here, evidently, is a solution to the riddle of the enigmatic Russian soul, as well as a key to the Russian national character.

This 'hero' – yes, the inverted commas are in place – is Ivan-the-Fool. He is a total opposite to a hero. He is neither strong, nor handsome and, what is more, he is a fool. Unprepossessing, ridiculous, down-trodden, stupid, submissive to cruel and evil people, but always overcoming all obstacles and misfortune, Ivan-the-Fool is a mass of contradictions. He has the appearance of a fool but, at critical moments, it is he who turns out to be the cleverest; he seems lazy and apathetic but, when need be, he is capable of acting quickly, boldly and very dynamically; he is uncouth and sensitive, carefree and concerned, cunning and trusting. By the end of the tale, he has got the better of everyone by virtue of his patience, kindness, native wit and absence of pretension. His strength lies in the fact that, due to his goodness and impracticality, he creates an impression, on the grasping people who surround him, of being weak and stupid and, as they believe, he is a fool, it never enters their heads that he could be brainy, bold and enterprising. And, listening to folk tales, each new generation of children learn not to judge people by their behaviour and external appearances.

The nation which has invented for itself a 'small' hero is a great nation.

Male and female characters in Russian folklore share the same characteristics: their inner beauty and talents are buried deep down inside them unseen to the naked eye. In order to perceive, a beautiful wife in a frog or a prince and husband in a monster, one should use one's heart rather than one's eyes.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, we have examined three sources confirming the existence of national character:

- 1) International jokes based on national stereotypes. These stereotypes do not so much reflect the salient characteristics of a people, as form them both in the eyes of other nations as well as in the eyes of the nation in question itself. A lot of Russians abroad, for instance, drink vodka, wear Russian-style flowered shawls and do things they never do back home just so as to confirm to the international stereotype of a typical Russian.
- 2) A national classical literature. Its reliability as a source is «undermined» to a certain extent by an author's individuality and, therefore, subjective viewpoint.
- 3) Folklore which, incidentally, also has written forms, is the most reliable of the above-listed sources. Although folklore falls back on stereotyped, schematic representation of heroes, personages and even plots, the very fact that it is the collective effort or work of a people and that through the process of oral transmission from generation to generation it has become as smooth and rounded as a pebble on the seashore and, therefore, devoid of the subjectivity and idiosyncrasies of individual creative writing, makes it the most reliable source and repository of knowledge on national character.

However, there is one more, the last – though not in terms of importance – most reliable and scientifically acceptable source of information on national character: it is His Majesty the National Language loaded and interwoven with National Culture. Language both reflects and moulds the character of its speaker and is the most objective index of national character.

However, revealing the part National Language plays in forming National Character requires another paper or, preferably, a book, so I have to stop at this.

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